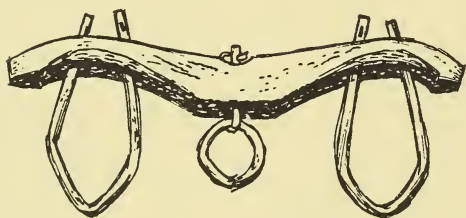


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Lincoln's early political
background.

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LINCOLN'S EARLY POLITICAL BACKGROUND.

BY DR. LOUIS A. WARREN.*

Abraham Lincoln chose to accumulate and systematize that branch of knowledge known as the science of government. His first public declaration of any importance was the announcement of his candidacy for the legislature of Illinois.

He decided that it would be to his intellectual, and also his economic advantage, to study law. The appeal of the bench, however, failed to surplant the call of the open forum. He never gained the same satisfaction in winning a law suit, as he did in receiving the endorsement of the public at the polls. All other activities, including his law practice, were set aside when some vital issue, affecting local or national government, needed a champion.

There is no reason to believe that Lincoln ever changed the desire for public approbation which found expression in his first political address. He remarked:

"Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition. Whether it be true or not, I can say, for one, that I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow-men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem. How far I shall succeed in gratifying this ambition is yet to be developed."

It is evident that this ambition was built up during the formative years of his life and possibly may have been traced to certain tendencies inherent in the Lincoln family.

It is the purpose of this paper to discuss some of the influences which contributed to the early political background of Abraham Lincoln and which placed him on the stump in Illinois in 1832 at the age of twenty-three years, a formidable candidate for a place in the state legislature.

Although modern science feels that acquired characteristics can not be passed on to the offspring, there is abundant

*Dr. Warren is director of the Lincoln Historical Research Foundation, sponsored by the Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, of Ft. Wayne, Indiana.

evidence that certain innate tendencies find expression with more or less regularity in succeeding generations.

In studying the paternal ancestry of Abraham Lincoln there seems to be sufficient grounds to conclude that the urge which started Lincoln in the field of political effort was contributed by his forbears.

The first letter which Abraham Lincoln wrote about his paternal ancestry was in reply to Solomon Lincoln of Hingham, Massachusetts, who had inquired about Abraham's family history.¹ This Solomon Lincoln, who had been a state senator and a recipient of some national political favors, was a descendant of Samuel Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln's first American progenitor. Neither Abraham nor Solomon knew of this common relationship, however.

Some months after writing this letter when Abraham Lincoln, as a member of Congress, was called into Massachusetts for a series of political addresses, he was greeted at Worcester by Mayor Levi Lincoln, Jr. Levi Lincoln's father, Levi Lincoln, Sr., had been attorney-general in Jefferson's cabinet. He also received an appointment as Associate Justice of the Supreme Court under Madison but declined the nomination.

The senior Levi Lincoln had a remarkable family of six children. Two sons, Levi Jr. and Enoch became governors of Massachusetts and Maine, respectively. Daniel, a Harvard graduate, although dead at the age of thirty one, was known as an orator of splendid genius, and already successful in local politics. John, the youngest son, became a Massachusetts state senator and held other elective offices. The two daughters of Levi Lincoln, Sr., both married members of the Massachusetts legislature.²

Levi Lincoln, Sr.'s brother, Dr. Abraham Lincoln, was also a man of prominence in New England. An early history mentions the fact that, "Dr. Lincoln's apothecary shop was noted for many years in his day as the headquarters

¹ Letter written, March 6, 1909.

² History of the Lincoln Farm, Lincoln, p. 162.

of the democratic politicians of Worcester . . . there the politics of the day were discussed . . . Dr. Lincoln loved politics and cigars equally well and all day long he would sit with heels up, smoking his much loved 'Indian weed.' ''³

The family of Levi Lincoln was by no means the only Lincoln group in New England which became distinguished. A book has recently been published by a historical society giving the names of hundreds of the descendants of Samuel Lincoln who occupied prominent places in the civic life of colonial days and the years that followed.

Abraham Lincoln, guest of Levi Lincoln, Jr., in 1848, did not know that he and his host were direct descendants of the same American progenitor, Samuel Lincoln of Hingham.

The state of Pennsylvania had several Lincolns of Massachusetts origin, who occupied prominent places in their respective communities. Among them there was one Abraham Lincoln, own brother to the president's great-grandfather, who was one of the 69 delegates to the state constitutional convention, which framed the famous state instrument.

This Pennsylvania Lincoln had been chosen as a county commissioner in 1772 and served in this capacity until his appointment as an officer in the Revolutionary war. In 1782 he was elected to the general assembly from Berks county and continued to be re-elected until 1786 with ever increasing majorities.⁴

Little is known about the grandfather of the President who was named, evidently, for the Pennsylvania Abraham near whom he lived as a boy. This branch of the family moved to Virginia and was residing there at the outbreak of the Revolution. The president's grandfather, Abraham, became an officer and his service as Judge Advocate, referred to on many occasions in the Rockingham County records, suggests the prominent place he occupied among his

³ Carl's Tour on Main St. Chapter 5.

⁴ Pennsylvania Archives, Second Series, Vol. 9.

constituents.⁵ He was only forty-two years of age when he was massacred by the Indians in Kentucky.

The father of the president is one of the most misrepresented characters in history. His declining years between the ages of fifty-five to seventy-five which he spent in the Illinois country have been used as illustrative of the activities of his entire life. As a young man there is unquestionable proof that he was considered a substantial citizen in the communities where he resided. He was the recipient of several minor appointments which might be called political favors.

After the death of his father, Thomas Lincoln was found often in the company of his father's own cousin Hananiah Lincoln. This Revolutionary officer was the first sheriff of Cumberland County, Kentucky, and Thomas served as a constable under him at least two terms.

Beginning in 1803 Thomas Lincoln served on many occasions as a guard of prisoners, and in 1805 was chosen as one of the patrollers of Hardin County. His appointment as a road surveyor indicates that he was a dependable citizen who could be held responsible for the duties calling upon the incumbent of this office.⁶

There is much evidence to show that Thomas Lincoln was allied with the anti-slavery groups that were springing up in Kentucky and his church affiliation was with a congregation holding emancipation principles. In writing to a Kentuckian during the civil war Abraham Lincoln said, "I am *naturally* anti-slavery; if slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I cannot *remember when I did not* so think and feel."⁷

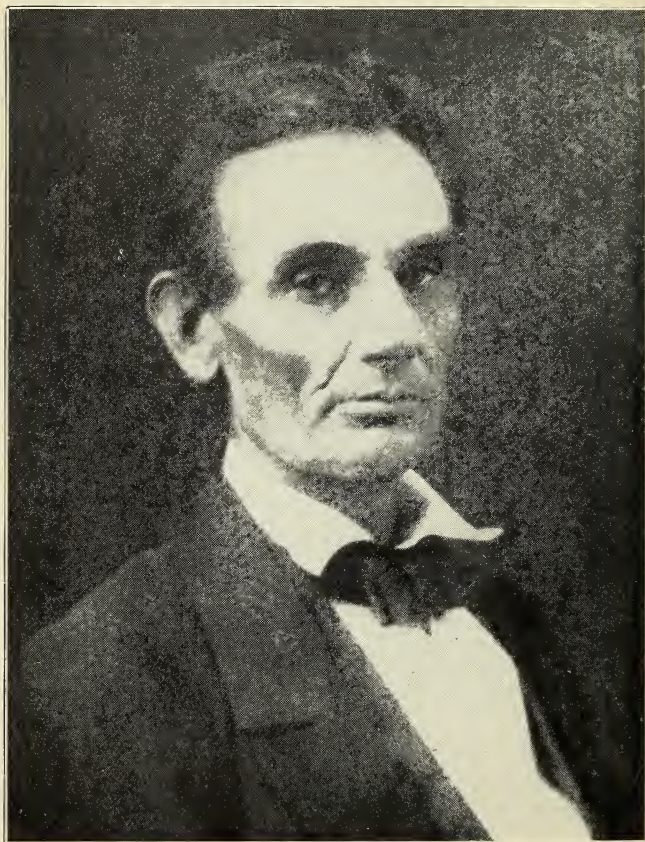
The innate tendencies which contributed to Lincoln's peculiar qualifications for a statesman must not be minimized, and are traced, as we have shown, through many generations of his paternal forbears.

The atmosphere which permeated Abraham Lincoln's

⁵ Rockingham County (Va.) Order Book, No. 16, p. 222.

⁶ Hardin County (Ky.) Court Order Books.

⁷ Letter to A. G. Hodges, April 4, 1864.



Abraham Lincoln by Hesler.

early home, contributed much to his advancement. Thomas Lincoln's own personal influence was supplemented by that of his second wife, Sarah Bush Lincoln.

The widow Bush who came in to the Lincoln home when Abraham was but ten years of age brought with her the reminiscences of a life spent in the very midst of political turmoil.

Her first husband was the jailor of Hardin County at the time of his death. The duties of the jailor's wife, among which was the caring for the court house, brought her in constant touch with the lawyers and political leaders of the district.

She not only married in this first matrimonial venture, a man who had political ambitions, but her father and brothers were office holders in Hardin County from the earliest days of her remembrance. Christopher Bush, her father, was High Sheriff of Hardin County for several years. After his decease many of the early offices he formerly held were filled by his sons. A sister of Sarah Bush married Ichabod Radley who was a Deputy sheriff of Hardin County. It would appear from the early records that Christopher Bush, his sons, and sons-in-law occupied about all the enforcement offices in the county and these were not gained without contest. In fact Thomas Lincoln himself served as a patroller with Christopher Bush, Jr., as captain of the patrol.

One can accept without hesitation the testimony of Dennis Hanks, an inmate of the Lincoln Home in Indiana, that the chief topic of an evening's conversation in the Lincoln cabin was politics.

When Prof. John C. Gulliver, of Andover, Massachusetts, who was intimately acquainted with Mr. Lincoln before the war asked him how he acquired such a remarkable control of language and speech, he replied:

"Well, if I have gotten any power that way I will tell you how I suppose I came to get it. You see when I was a boy over in Indiana, all the local politicians used to come to

our cabin to discuss politics with my father. I used to sit by and listen to them but father would not let me ask many questions and there were a great many things I did not understand. Well, I'd go up to my room in the attic and set down or pace back and forth till I made out just what they meant and then I'd lie awake for hours putting their ideas into words that the boys around our way could understand."

His own sister and the three children of Sarah Bush Lincoln, who grew up with Abraham, served as an audience for his early oratorical efforts. It is apparent from the testimony of one of these associates that Abraham's first speeches were of religious or moral character, and the training of self expression became evident when subjects of government were discussed.

The inherent tendencies and environmental influences which guided the youth into the channels of public appeal were further cultivated by his admiration for certain political leaders of the day.

The activities of Ratcliff Boone, pioneer Indiana statesman could not but have impressed him. Ratcliff was a close relative of Daniel Boone, whose cousin Anne Boone had married Abraham Lincoln, the Pennsylvania legislator. Ratcliff Boone lived but a few miles from the Lincolns. In 1818, the year Abraham Lincoln's mother died, Boone was elected to the state senate and was chosen its president. The following year he was elected Lieutenant Governor polling twice as many votes as his opponent. Eight times he was elected to Congress from his district. On one of the two occasions when he was elected Lieutenant Governor, he filled out the unexpired term of the governor who had resigned. His political activities covered that period of pioneer history in which Abraham Lincoln was growing up.

The campaign methods of Boone were not unlike those of the Railsplitter. While Boone's opponent was trying to convince the owner of some cross road blacksmith shop that

he should support him, Boone would hammer out some useful instrument on the anvil.

The speeches of Boone, many of which have been preserved in the early newspapers, may also be responsible for some of the unique expressions used by Lincoln in later years. A brief paragraph from one of Boone's earliest speeches follows:

"In presenting myself to you, gentlemen, as a candidate for the office in question, I have nothing to claim through my ancestors nor from former services, but alone depend on what may be thought justly merit and the disposition of those who have the right to determine who shall be jointly charged with the administration of the state government . . . should my wishes merit the approbation of a majority of my countrymen they will confer on me a lasting obligation for which I shall pledge myself to use every exertion in my power to promote the interest of the state and happiness of its citizens."⁸

An influence greater than the personal contact with Boone and other local political aspirants, was his indirect association with the men he met in books and newspapers. Among them all, even superseding the mighty Washington, was Henry Clay. We have Lincoln's own testimony supporting his admiration for this gallant crusader.

During Lincoln's young manhood he was kept in close touch, by means of the weekly newspapers, with the reforms advocated by Clay.

In the years 1825 and 1826 the *Western Sun* of Vincennes published eighteen long articles by or about Henry Clay, which set forth in detail his philosophy of government. Here without doubt was the seed bed of Lincoln's own political ideals.

At the store of William Jones an opportunity was given the pioneers of the Lincoln community to exchange opinions about political affairs. Jones, for whom Lincoln served as a clerk in the winter of 1829-30 was a warm Clay sympathizer.

⁸ *Western Sun*, May 8, 1819.

In the Evansville Daily Journal of July 19, 1860, is a note from a correspondent commenting on Jones' political attitude.

"William Jones is an old citizen of the county who has taken little active part in politics since the Clay and Polk campaign and who on learning of the defeat of his favorite in that memorable contest was for several days incapacitated for attending to his usual business. He appeals to his friends, to give old Abe their undivided support."

Those who have wondered at Lincoln's early grasp of national and international affairs, even in his young manhood, can easily account for this knowledge, by fingering through the files of the early newspapers. Some of the subjects discussed in these pioneer periodicals are as follows: Free Schools, Colonization of Negroes, Declaration of Independence and its signers, The Tariff Question, Geographical sketches of the western country, Fugitive Slave Law, Foreign Relations, Viewpoints of Robert Owens on National Affairs, Moral philosophy and habits, activities and spirit of youth, Addresses of Napoleon, Liberty of the press, State rights, etc.

The liberal education of Abraham Lincoln was gained through the medium of the weekly newspaper, and he may well be called the product of the early American press.

The Lincolns migrated to the Illinois country less than one month after Abraham had become 21 years of age. The rest of the year was occupied in seeing his father settled and in fencing in the land.

Aside from a few odd jobs in the winter months he had no steady occupation until engaged by Offutt, to build a flat boat and pilot it to New Orleans.

In July 1831 he took up his permanent residence at New Salem and the following month cast his first vote and served as clerk of the election. When he announced himself as a candidate for the legislature in 1832 he had been a resident of the community where he was living but eight months and a citizen of Illinois but two years. He had just passed his

twenty-third birthday and was a stranger to most of the people in the district he hoped to represent.

One fact, however, we must accept; he would not have aspired to the office had he not felt that he was qualified to fill it.

If one has any doubts about his ability to set forth in a clear concise form the principles in which he believed, let him read the first public address of Abraham Lincoln delivered in the interest of his candidacy.

Here we find an orderly presentation of subject matter which dealt with the issues in which the pioneers were especially interested, and discussed by one who apparently understood these needs.

This maiden political speech of Abraham Lincoln's may be outlined as follows:

INTRODUCTION—"Having become a candidate for the honorable office of one of your representatives in the next General Assembly of this state, in accordance with an established custom and the principles of true Republicanism, it becomes my duty to make known to you, the people whom I propose to represent, my sentiments with regard to local affairs."

ARGUMENT—The Improvement of the Sangamon River.

1. Internal improvements:

- a. Opening of good roads.
- b. Clearing of navigable streams.
- c. Unequaled utility of railroads.
- d. Prohibitive cost of railroads.
- e. Improvement of Sangamon River.
 - Best suited to infant resources.
 - Has observed stages of river.
 - Drifted timber greatest barrier.
 - Dam to change river course.
 - Channels to straighten course.
 - Vastly important to the people.

2. A National Bank:
 - a. Loaning money at exorbitant rates.
 - b. Law fixing limits of usury.
 - c. Favors law which cannot be evaded.
3. Education:
 - a. Most important subject before us.
 - b. A moderate education for all.
 - c. Morality, sobriety, enterprise and industry, hastened by it.
4. Existing Laws:
 - a. Alterations may be necessary.
 - b. Estray laws, road laws, etc.
 - c. Framers wiser than myself I should prefer not meddling with these laws.

CONCLUSION—"I am young and unknown to many of you. I was born and have ever remained in the most humble walks of life. I have no wealthy or popular relatives or friends to recommend me. My case is thrown exclusively upon the independent voters of the county; and, if elected, they will have conferred a favor upon me which I shall be unremitting in my labors to compensate. But, if the good people in their wisdom shall see fit to keep me in the background, I have been too familiar with disappointments to be very much chagrined."

Abraham Lincoln, candidate for the Legislature of Illinois who enlisted in the Black Hawk War was more than a champion wrestler and recognized strong man. His mental superiority over most of his contemporaries, if put to the test, would have been as pronounced as his physical prowess.

Most authors in writing on this period of Lincoln's life have considered his service in the Black Hawk War as a very great asset to his political achievements. An event at the close of the war, however, was responsible for his first and only defeat suffered at the hands of the people.

On July 16, 1832, Abraham Lincoln was mustered out of service at Whitewater, Michigan Territory, (now Wiscon-

sin). The election day was set for August sixth. Three hundred miles separated Lincoln from the New Salem voting precinct and the election was but twenty days off.

When he arose the morning following the disbandment of the company intent on making a hurried trip back to the scene of the political contest he found that his horse had been stolen. The stolen horse incident might compare favorably with the Salt River experience of Henry Clay.

Except for a short distance which he covered in a canoe he was obliged to walk the entire way.

It is very doubtful if Lincoln could have arrived in New Salem before August first, giving him but five days to conduct his canvass before the election took place.

His campaigning was necessarily confined to the immediate vicinity of his home and the results of the election reveal what might have taken place in other precincts, had he been given sufficient time to visit the voters.

Of the 281 votes cast in the New Salem precinct Lincoln received all but three votes. In the entire county of Sangamon his total vote was 657, not enough to elect him although he received more votes than five of the other candidates for the office. He needed but 159 more votes to overtake Peter Cartwright. He would undoubtedly have gleaned these extra votes if his return had not been retarded by the absence of his stolen horse.

The Lincoln of the early Illinois days is portrayed by his friend Joshua F. Speed in his very interesting reminiscences as follows: "In the spring of 1836 I first saw Abraham Lincoln. I was then fresh from Kentucky and had heard many of her great orators. It seemed to me then as it seems to me now, that I never heard a more effective speaker."

One must conclude after learning of the illustrious Lincolns in Colonial and Revolutionary days that there was good Lincoln blood in the veins of the western American statesman. One is also convinced after studying the environment of Lincoln's home and his early political contacts that he

came by his political passion, naturally. One must further conclude, after reading similar editions of books and newspapers Lincoln read, that his source of information on the major questions of government, was sufficient for a rich and fruitful early political background.

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